

Governor's School Safety Conference

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How to promote organizational and individual
resilience following a critical incident.

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Build Healthy Culture

The fundamental role of culture as it functions in the everyday lives of individuals, regardless of nationality, ethnic background, geographical location or ancestry, is to help us to interpret the world around us and adapt to our environments.

Self-Healing Communities. Porter, Martin, & Anda. June 2016

Stress

- **Positive Stress:** moderate, brief, and generally a normal part of life (e.g. entering a new childcare setting).
- **Tolerable Stress:** events that have the potential to alter the developing brain negatively, but which occur infrequently and give the brain time to recover (i.e. the death of a loved one).
- **Toxic Stress:** strong, frequent, and prolonged activation of the body's stress response system (e.g. chronic neglect).

Protective Factors

At least one stable, caring, and supportive relationship.

Supportive context & cultural traditions.

Achieving a sense of mastery over one's life circumstances.

Essential Skills:

- Social Support
- Self-regulation
- Social Competency
- Executive Functioning

(National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015)

A Resilient Community

- Anyone's barn fire is everyone's barn fire.
- The best gift you can give a dysregulated person is the presence of a regulated person.
- While we cannot always prevent tragedy or threat, how we prepare and how we respond has a more powerful influence on the impact than the event itself.

Before



A Staunch Acceptance of Reality

The fact is, when we truly stare down reality, we prepare ourselves to act in ways that allow us to endure and survive extraordinary hardship. We train ourselves to survive before the fact.

Diane Coutu, Harvard Business Review, 2002

Make the Unfamiliar-Familiar

- Build relationship within the greater community.
- Create intentional & adaptive associations.
- Establish ritual & routine.
- Practice- frequent drills & rehearsal.
- Foster a sense of belonging for all.
- Encourage strong leadership & community.

The Science of Resilience

“Triggers”

- Cues or signals that act as a sign of possible danger, based on traumatic experiences, leading to a set of responses oriented toward survival.
- The responses can be emotional, physiological or behavioral.
- The interpretation and response is determined by the perception, beliefs, and assumptions of the individual more so than the “reality” of the situation.

The stress of daily life will challenge the establishment of healthy community & preparedness.

When we are stressed:

- **We are less inclined to share resources.**
- **We are internally focused & less aware of others.**
- **We become rigid & more judgmental.**

Preparedness

Set aside regular time to discuss scenarios.

Suggested topics:

- Find and review a postvention curriculum — ex. [Hazeldon Lifelines Postvention](#).
- Establish and clarify procedures & roles.
- Discuss example scenarios.
- Who will manage offers of support?
- How will regulation spaces be established? Establish them now so they are familiar and calming.
- Routine will be essential- how will you balance the need for support with the need for routine?
- How will you decide what rituals are most appropriate?
- Discuss the complexity of memorials.

During



An Uncanny Ability to Improvise

Diane Coutu, Harvard Business Review, 2002

Key Strategies

The best gift you can give a dysregulated person is the presence of a regulated person.

- Body language & tone of voice
- Choice of language is powerful
- Honest, concise, & directive
- Tell the truth or if you cannot/do not repair later- state your intention.
- Give the amount of information that is developmentally appropriate

Immediately Following

A Deep Belief that Life is Meaningful

Resilient people devise constructs about their suffering to create some sort of meaning for themselves and others.

Diane Coutu, Harvard Business Review, 2002



Trauma: A Shared Definition

Individual trauma results from an EVENT, series of events, or set of circumstances that is EXPERIENCED by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse EFFECTS on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

(SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, July 2014)

Trauma is not in an event, it is in the meaning that we make of events.

- Notice the narrative as it is being written.
- Influence meaning to be accurate & adaptive.
- Help people own only their fair share.
- Take a stance of curiosity.

Trauma response is also strongly connected to the “sensory snapshot” that we take during an event.

The role of the school remains critical but limited.

- To maintain the structure and order of the school routine.
- To manage reactions with appropriate and supportive interventions.
- To provide resources and support to the school community to recognize and minimize risk.

Hazeldon Lifelines Postvention,
Underwood, Fell & Spinazzola, 2010

Normal Reactions to a Traumatic Event for Those in Helping Roles

- No one who responds to a critical event is untouched by it.
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- You may not want to leave the scene until the work is finished.
- You likely will try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment.
- You may deny the need for rest and recovery time.

"Cataclysms of Emotion"

Typical reactions to a critical incident

shock/denial

anger/frustration/rage

confusion

fear/ terror

shame/ guilt/ blame

humiliation

grief

sadness/sorrow

restlessness

fatigue

moodiness

sleep & eating disturbance

muscle tremors or "ticks"

nightmares

profuse sweating episodes

heart palpitations

vomiting/ diarrhea

hyper-vigilance

difficulty with concentration

flashbacks and mental images of traumatic events

startle responses

Anticipate Resilience & Need for Support

Factors that may influence the impact of a crisis or critical incidents on the school staff include:

- Proximity to the event
- Personal history
- Education level
- Age and gender
- Optimism
- Available support networks
- A history of psychiatric difficulties

Dosage Exposure

Joseph Davis, Ph.D. 2013

The closer the individual is to the critical incident the stronger or weaker the reaction they will have to the event.

This is not always the case, especially for children. Reactions are very individual and influenced by a complex array of factors.

We can and should predict who may need support and yet need to remain open and maintain capacity to monitor responses for the whole community.

There is no right way to respond.

Isolating people due to our reactions to unexpected responses increases vulnerability.

Vulnerable Members of the Community.

Children and adolescents who have a history of trauma or loss may have powerful or unexpected feelings in response to a critical event.

- Feeling calmer than expected
- No reaction
- Irritation to the response as they felt so isolated with prior individual trauma/loss
- Stronger than expected reactions to the event given their proximity to the people or circumstances
- A decrease in self-reliance

Youth sometimes change the story to match the emotion and then present as dramatic or dishonest, which only further isolates them and increases their risk.

Train & coach staff to:

- Validate the emotion & pay less attention to the content of what the youth is saying
- Normalize strong reaction to sad events- give a simple example
- Spend less energy trying to explain the reaction & focus on how to cope with such emotions
- Focus on healthy coping & reduce isolation

What we need as adults may not match what students need in a crisis.

- They may become more in need of support when we need them to be more self-reliant.
- They will want familiar adults not the unfamiliar but highly trained professionals we bring in.
- Our need to contain impact may result in unintentional invalidation of their needs.
- They will crave routine and normalcy and we may not be ready to return to our roles.

Ways to Help Manage Your Stress

- Rotate work from high-stress to lower stress functions.
- Rotate work from the scene to routine assignments, as practicable.
- Use EAP programs available through your organization/ agency.
- Drink plenty of water and eat healthy snacks, such as fresh fruit, whole grain breads, and other energy foods.
- Take frequent, brief breaks from the scene, as possible and appropriate.
- Talk about your emotions to process what you have seen and done.
- Stay in touch with your family and friends.
- Participate in memorials and rituals.
- Pair up with another responder so that you may monitor one another's stress.

Key Points

- The pace of the crisis & immediate time after will likely be rapid. Those in leadership roles need to appropriately and intentionally reset the pace to be slower and more thoughtful, when appropriate.
- Balance the use of preparation as a guide with flexibility to adjust to the actual situation. The “right” thing to do may end up being different from what was predicted.
- Offer universal support to reduce the likelihood of isolating or missing a vulnerable community member.
- Remember that the adaptive responses of some may directly conflict the adaptive responses of others.
- Give voice to all & offer strong leadership.

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www.samhsa.gov

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